

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

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The last word Popular political film

by Chuck Kleinhans, John Hess and Julia Lesage

As we enter Spring 2007, the Bush agenda appears in full disarray. Within its own terms and strategic goals the Iraq war is a huge disaster. First, pumping up post-9/11 anxieties, the Bush team lied to get the war going. Pursuing its actual goals to change the balance in the Middle East, to gain control of Iraqi oil, and provide a set of military bases between Iran and Syria, the Bush team claimed to be pursuing Al Qaeda while neglecting Afghanistan and allowing the Taliban to regroup, rally, and produce their own “surge” there. Today no one outside of the White House daily talking-points script believes Iraq can be salvaged; the only “positive” outcome now seems patching together a cover-up and getting out before the impending full-blown civil war.

Today the U.S. has lost strategic focus, pissed away international prestige and credibility, and crippled its ability to respond militarily in the future, while increasing debt, further wrenching trade imbalance, and compromising the domestic economy. With the recent shift in U.S. public opinion, evidenced in the November 2006 Congressional elections, and the subsequent ramping up of U.S. media skepticism regarding the Bush agenda, there seems to be a new terrain for thinking about popular political films. With more of the public critically aware of issues such as the war, scandals over commercial college loan programs, risky mortgages that kept the housing boom rolling but which are now going belly up, the high price of fuel, and more dramatic examples of the fallout from global warming, it seems that the Bush euphoria is finally coming apart. Not only are major political and economic issues being looked at more critically, the fallout seems have reached culture and communications

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issues. For example, the unexpected firing of talkshow host Don Imus might signal a more basic cultural shift in what will be tolerated in the media sphere.

For years the rightwing spin machine has continually harangued “Hollywood liberals” for leading an attack on American “traditional values.” From celebrities providing campaign funds for Democrats, or promoting a gay agenda, or creating skepticism about the clergy and Christianity or just showing that sex can be fun, the liberal media was an all-purpose villain for the radical right. And among the right wing pundits just about any example could be brought forward: e.g., Harry Potter films promoted pagan witchcraft; *Mission Impossible* undermined trust in the CIA, or *American Beauty* showed the nuclear family falling apart.

But after the Congressional election, the hangover may be finally settling in with Bush’s dim realization that he really blew it (while Chaney seems to be desperately holding on to a magical thinking that repeating right slogans will change history). And many Republicans now seem to realize the tide has turned and time is running out. There is a different space for thinking. It wasn’t that big a surprise to find Al Gore celebrated and *An Inconvenient Truth* winning at the Academy Awards. But this film’s success was not a one-shot wonder. Rather it was another confirmation that political-themed feature documentaries could get substantial theatrical play and rack up impressive rentals and DVD sales. In terms of the film’s political effect, after years of vociferously denying that global warming was a fact, the administration has reluctantly admitted it’s real, though they resist doing anything about it. And in an era when network TV has slashed its news function and any and all critical or investigatory function, theatrical feature documentary seems to be one of the few places for examining contemporary matters of concern--as seen with Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *Bowling for Columbine*. And cablecasting and DVD rental seems to have provided a new space for documentaries that go beyond cable’s standby themes of sex and drugs.

Film dramas with strong liberal political leanings such as the recent *Blood Diamond* and *The Constant Gardener* (big pharmaceuticals) join others of the decade such as *Syrianna* (international oil), and *The Insider* (corporate tobacco) in assigning blame to multinational corporations for manipulating state politics and making the world a more dangerous and unhealthy place. Other recent major dramatic films revisit the progressive past: *Good Night and Good Luck*

on Edward R. Murrow's critique of Senator McCarthy, and *Amazing Grace* on the 19C British struggle against slave trade. And the dystopian future film remains a staple for scoring political points scoring in entertainment cinema: for example, *Children of Men*, the filmic release of *Aeon Flux*, *V for Vendetta*. and a dozen more.

None of these films offers the perfect or model radical political film, but in a time when the left has been battered again and again, there's something hopeful in encountering these examples. *The Constant Gardener*, for example, can be easily critiqued on an abstract political level for assigning villainy to specific corrupt figures (who presumably can then be brought to justice) rather than analyzing the underlying system of how the state fails to regulate criminal capitalism. In narrative terms, the script's entwining the political action line with a love story through a detective narrative is both what makes the film readily understandable and marketable and what constricts any deeper analysis of the issues. So: a mixed bag. But *The Constant Gardener* stands up as a film that gets a wide audience, vividly captures the imagination, that remains memorable.

When we started *Jump Cut* in the mid-70s one of the recurrent questions in our articles and reviews (as in many other film publications) centered on how political Hollywood film could be, or in what way it could serve political ends. Against crude politically correct analyses that simply dismissed all popular entertainment cinema as narcotic, some critics posited revivals of realism, naturalism, and neorealism as the solution. Others saw these forms as themselves hopelessly compromised and insisted on a formally radical cinema. Skeptics pointed out that both the naturalistic strain and the avant-garde strain could not appeal to a mass audience, yet the masses were presumably the only ones who could actually make a revolutionary change. The terms of this discussion have changed over the years, but often more in terms of style than substance, with new terms or phrases arriving, but relatively unchanged in terms of major conceptual shifts.

The case for realism, including variations such as naturalism and neo-realism, is often linked to a tradition of politically charged representation--both visual and narrative. Literary realism in the 19th Century and a realist movement in the visual arts were linked to ideas of progressive politics and a larger inclusive representation of all elements of society, all classes, all peoples, as distinct from the idealized

representations of European neo-classicism, and the frequently extreme and personal representations of European Romanticism. Arriving in cinematic form, realism was linked to the photographic representational aesthetic, politically progressive causes, and the everyday world. In the post World War 2 era, film realism found its passionate theorists in André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer. Not only did Italian neorealism of the forties and fifties sweep the imagination of a new generation of European filmmakers, it inspired North American independents in the 60s, and film artists in the developing world--in Cuba, India, Latin America, and Africa. Some variation of neo-realism still remains the default mode of most filmmakers who aspire to tell previously untold stories and bring their culture to light, etc. as evidenced by much of the film and video production of feminist, gay and lesbian, and racial minority movements of the last 40 years.

Realism is assumed to be readily understandable: i.e., a cinema ordinary viewers can easily follow. Yet in unimaginative hands realism also lends itself to a kind of predictability, lack of aesthetic imagination, and core sentimentalism. And audiences today live in such a media-saturated environment that they readily grasp techniques that disrupt the surface conventions of realist presentation, be that complex temporal shifts within narration or such stylistic innovation as radical exploitation of color saturation. Which leads back to realism not as a normative set of representational conventions, but as speaking to a need for a deeper understanding and analysis of a world in flux--about which the audience deeply senses that the surface level of society, the official media spin, the dominant ideology is not telling the whole story. Spielberg's *Munich* provides an interesting example, with the director of *Schindler's List* viciously attacked by U.S. Zionists for not hewing to the received version of history, but daring to question conventional ideas, especially around the justification of vengeance and retribution. Joe Dante's hour-long contribution to the Showtime Masters of Horror series, "Homecoming," provides another unexpected point of entry. In that film, dead veterans of the Iraq war emerge from the grave as zombies trying to vote the politicians who started the war out of office. Electoral politics in the horror genre? Totally unexpected, but wickedly clever. Political critique in the cultural sphere is emerging in new forms and new places, as seen in Annalee Newitz's new book, *Pretend We're Dead: Capitalist Monsters in American Pop Culture*, which reads popular literature and films about serial killers, mad doctors, the undead, and cyborgs as allegories of present society.

The power of politically inspired film at the present moment is that it can capture the imagination and help re-imagine the possibilities. We may be at the start of a thaw in a frozen stasis in which the neocons and evangelicals seemed to be dominating everything. We want, we need, we desire, films that can warm it up.

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